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Roberto Roccu & Benedetta Voltolini

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## Security and stability reframed, selective engagement maintained? The EU in the Mediterranean after the Arab uprisings

Roberto Roccu<sup>a</sup> and Benedetta Voltolini<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of European and International Studies, King's College London, London, UK; <sup>b</sup>Centre d'études européennes, Sciences Po, Paris, France

### ABSTRACT

This conclusion provides a comparative survey of the main findings of this special issue and suggests avenues for further research. It shows that the security–stability nexus through which the EU approaches the Southern Mediterranean has experienced some measure of reframing in the wake of the Arab uprisings. While leading the EU towards a more inclusive approach, this partial frame redefinition has on the whole translated into forms of highly selective engagement. This conclusion suggests that this mismatch between the change in frame definition and its enactment in different policy areas can be accounted for with reference to four factors: institutional sources of policy rigidity, time lag, issue politicization and the willingness of Mediterranean partners to engage with the EU.

### Introduction

The Arab uprisings that started in 2011 were viewed as a moment of crisis that could potentially lead to a significant change in the EU's approach towards the Mediterranean region. Not only were the authoritarian regimes in power challenged by popular protests, but the policies implemented by external actors, including the EU, were also deemed to have failed. Facing this new situation, the EU response to the uprisings was presented as aiming to address the root causes of the revolts and contribute to the democratic development of Southern Mediterranean countries. This resulted in the 'more-for-more' approach and the establishment of some new programmes (e.g., SPRING, ENPARD, etc.; European Commission, 2011a, 2011b). However, most of the literature agrees that the EU approach in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings has been marked by continuity with past policies, only masked with a new rhetoric of participation, inclusion and democracy (e.g., Colombo & Tocci, 2012; Teti, 2012). It is argued that EU

policies have only changed cosmetically, but that they continue to favour the pursuit of the same EU interests, namely its own security through the stability of the Southern Mediterranean. Thus, in strong continuity with its policies of cooperation with authoritarian regimes prior to the Arab uprisings, the EU approach has remained anchored to a security-driven logic aimed at ensuring stability in the region and EU economic profit (e.g., Durac & Cavatorta, 2009; Gillespie & Youngs, 2002; Seeberg, 2009; Youngs, 2004). For the literature, hence, there is still a rhetoric–practice gap, according to which the EU keeps preaching the importance of democracy, the rule of law and human rights, but it is ready to turn its back to these principles when it comes to protecting its security and ensuring stability, which remain the real priorities of the EU in the Mediterranean.

While there is some truth to this argument, as EU policies have hardly undergone a complete overhaul, the contributions to this special issue have at least qualified this view. The investigation of a number of policy areas and countries undertaken here shows more variation than is usually allowed for in the literature. This variation appears to be greater in the conceptualization and understanding of the issues at stake than in actual policy implementation. While this might point towards relatively unchanging policy outcomes, the extent of rethinking apparent in how the EU engages in specific policy areas suggests that a mere instrumentalist understanding positing a rhetoric-practice gap is also limited.

With the aim of providing a more granular picture of change and continuity, this special issue has thus proposed that the security–stability nexus should be considered a master frame shaping the EU approach to the Mediterranean. Hence, each contribution has looked at the extent to which the interpretation of the security–stability nexus has changed in the wake of the uprisings. This decision was based on two elements. On the one hand, as discussed in the introduction, the limitations of existing accounts can at least partly be attributed to their tendency to take EU interests as given. A focus on frames, understood as ways of interpreting information and simplifying reality by identifying a specific problem definition and cause–effect relations, providing possible actions and offering a moral evaluation (Bardwell, 1991; Dery, 2000; Entman, 1993; Huber 1991), appears especially promising, as it allows a problematization of how EU interests are understood in different policy domains. On the other hand, as the literature on framing usually focuses more on their definition, this special issue has also asked how the security–stability master frame has been enacted by the EU in its relations with Southern Mediterranean partners. Enactment has been addressed with reference to the modalities of EU engagement with MENA partners as well as the inclusiveness of this engagement, that is: the range of actors involved. Additionally, inasmuch as frames are the result of interactions among actors trying to make sense of the surrounding environment, the consequences of engagement on the EU framing of security and stability have also been considered.

## Lessons learnt: Reframing and selective engagement in EU–MENA relations

In light of this discussion, some main findings emerge from the comparison of all policy areas analysed in this special issue. First, while security and stability still feature prominently in the EU approach to different sectors in the region, it appears that the security–stability nexus has experienced some partial change or reframing (Laws & Rein, 2003). If the security–stability master frame informs the EU overall approach, it has been shown that, for example, security and stability in the economic area are understood differently than in the case of religion and relations with Islamist parties. In the economic sphere, security is predominantly defined as the security of investments and activities of EU-based companies, which requires political stability, often conflated with regime stability. In contrast, security takes on an ontological dimension when it comes to religious engagement and relations with Islamist actors. Here, the defining frame is based on the secular-liberal identity of the EU and the need to have a stable cognitive environment that does not challenge the self.

Putting into question static views of EU interests, most contributions have shown that there has been a partial change or reframing in the security–stability nexus in each policy area in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings. The clear outlier in this respect is (Durac, 2017) contribution on counterterrorism, which suggests that regime stability has continued to be at the heart of EU policy in this area exactly as it was prior to the uprisings. On this front, the EU appears chiefly concerned with the potentially destabilizing effects of genuine regime change entailed by democratization, which might lead to a greater terrorist threat. At the same time, Durac notes, this short-termist approach props up autocratic and repressive regimes, thus reproducing a very fertile environment for terrorist recruitment.

It would not be unfair to say that in the majority of cases in which security and stability are actually reframed, the understanding of the nexus has only been altered at the margins, with the most evident repercussions in terms of the method or approach used to pursue security and stability in each specific area. Thus, while the Arab uprisings have partially challenged underlying assumptions about each specific policy, they have not produced a U-turn in EU frames. Dandashly (2017) for instance suggests that after the uprisings, the EU understanding of democracy promotion has shifted towards ‘deep democracy’; but also – and equally importantly – towards a strengthening of the focus on ‘human security’. At the same time, both these developments are constrained and shaped by the persistence of a material understanding of security revolving around the stability of Southern Mediterranean regimes. In the case of religious engagement, instead, Wolff (2017) suggests that in the wake of the Arab uprisings the EU approach has been shaped by a twin concern with both ontological and traditional security. Interestingly, the scope of the former has

been broadened, leading the EU to focus more on training its diplomatic staff on how to develop a greater sensitivity to religious issues. According to *Wolff*, however, these changes are still essentially geared towards putting the EU in a better position to promote its own secular-liberal model, which is still considered the best tool for maximizing EU security.

Both Kourtelis (2017) and Roccu (2017) demonstrate that the Arab uprisings have clearly questioned the EU's assumptions about security and stability. In the case of financial reforms, Roccu shows that the Arab uprisings led to a reframing of the idea of stability for the EU, which went beyond the stability of the regime to include the concept of 'deep democracy' and the job creation functions of small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Despite a changed perception in the types of needs, however, an ordoliberal template remains the preferred method to push for reforms and change in the region. Minor changes have also been observed by Kourtelis in the agricultural sector, where food, environmental and political security are still at the heart of the EU approach. However, in the wake of the uprisings, these elements are now understood in a way that has led the EU to pursue an integrated approach to agricultural development that is more inclusive, comprehensive and bottom-up, at least on paper. Not dissimilarly, in her discussion of reframing, Herranz-Surrallés (2017) argues that the market liberal frame that has long characterized energy policy has been partially modified, as the preference for energy market integration prior to the uprisings is now complemented by a stronger emphasis on the need to ensure energy supplies due to geopolitical concerns.

More visible changes in the master frame can be seen both in EU relations with Islamist parties, and in EU migration governance. With respect to the former, Voltolini and Colombo (2017) show that, while security and stability continue to be perceived in ontological terms, the EU does not apply a black-or-white approach to political Islam anymore, which in the past had led to the categorization of all Islamists as a potential threat to the EU's identity. Instead, it has adopted a more nuanced view of security, according to which some forms of political Islam are not a threat to the EU's identity and can thus be engaged with. Migration governance arguably provides the case in which the reframing has been most extensive. Here, Geddes and Hadj-Abdou (2017) detect the emergence of a 'new normal', based on accepting the fact that the EU faces and will likely keep facing migratory pressures at its Mediterranean borders. This points towards migration becoming comparatively more relevant in how the EU defines security and stability in its relations with MENA partners.

Second, the EU has demonstrated its intention to be more inclusive and engage with a broader range of actors. This seems to be one of the main changes in the EU approach across policy areas, as in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings the EU finds it necessary to reach out to a wide variety of actors, and include them either into the policy-making process or as potential beneficiaries of its policies. Economically, the EU has aimed to go beyond the narrow range

of actors involved before 2011. This was clear in its promotion of Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas as well as in the inclusion of SMEs in several sector programmes, such as ENPARD and the Risk Capital Facility discussed, respectively, by Kourtelis and Roccu. Similarly, democracy promotion activities have enhanced the number of tools targeting civil society organizations (CSOs), increasingly perceived as key to fostering democratic transitions in the region (Dandashly). A broader scope of engagement with religious actors, especially Islamist actors, has also become a linchpin of the EU policy after the Arab uprisings, with respect to both party politics (Voltolini and Colombo) and relations with institutionalized forms of religion (Wolff). Some hints at shifting towards a more inclusive policy are also visible in the energy sector, where NGOs and the academia have indicated the need for a more developmental and inclusive approach (Herranz-Surrallés). The aim of greater inclusiveness is also visible in the migrant-centred perspective envisaged in the 'Global Approach to Migration and Mobility', which additionally opened the way for more sustained dialogue at the regional level (Geddes and Hadj-Abdou). Again, the EU intention to keep a regime-centric focus appears confirmed only with reference to counterterrorism (Durac).

Third, this greater emphasis on inclusion is consequential for the more general direction of EU policies towards the Southern Mediterranean. Evidence from most chapters however appears to dispel the view that engagement with a broader range of actors translates into more substantial policy change. In the more economic spheres, in fact, all inclusionary moves have gone towards reinforcing, and indeed broadening and deepening, the same economic model. Herranz-Surrallés is perhaps slightly more open to the possibility of productively accommodating alternative views within the market liberal model governing energy relations than Roccu is on ordoliberal influences. However, the broad thrust towards re-iterating in marginally different terms the same template for economic cooperation and development, in a process of 'failing forward', very much permeates both accounts, as well as Kourtelis' one on agriculture. In migration governance (Geddes and Hadj-Abdou), religious diplomacy (Wolff) and democracy promotion (Dandashly), moves towards greater inclusion appear in fact entirely compatible with the further securitization of the issues at stake, something that has always been the case for counterterrorism, as evidenced by Durac. Here, the only outlier appears to be the greater engagement with parties in power perceived as moderate representatives of political Islam (Voltolini and Colombo). Even in this case, however, the main driver appears to be the need to find new interlocutors to cooperate with, as part of the broader 'pragmatist' turn now officially enshrined in the EU Global Strategy (2016). This finding on policy direction does not necessarily lead us towards the dominant *plus ça change* view. Rather, it points towards how the understanding of security has been broadened in almost all sectors under consideration. Being one of its defining elements,

this inevitably affects also how the security–stability nexus is understood, and hence how it can be pursued and enacted differently.

However, and this is the fourth finding of the special issue, the enactment – studied here especially in the form of engagement – shows that the EU's intention to be more inclusive has largely remained on paper, as in most cases the number and types of actors actually involved has not significantly changed in practice. As shown in the contributions, most of the previous patterns of engagement have continued to shape EU policies. Both Kourtelis and Roccu show that, despite the idea of opening up to a wider range of actors, EU policies follow similar exclusionary logics to the ones pursued before the Arab uprisings. This is visible in as diverse sectors as agriculture and migration governance, where the pledge for greater inclusion has translated into more engagement with EU-based actors, respectively, in the form of think-tanks and EU-based agricultural SMEs in the case examined by Kourtelis, and in the greater weight attributed to migrant destination countries detailed by Geddes and Hadj-Abdou. As shown by Herranz-Surrallés, energy policy has followed a similar pattern, as the attempts to make it more inclusive and sensitive to developmental issues have not really borne their fruit, with energy still circumscribed to state actors, industry representatives and financial institutions. Interestingly, even in the case of democracy promotion and engagement with Islamist actors, where one might expect stronger evidence of inclusion, the picture is mixed. Here, engagement is selective across as well as within countries. As Dandashly demonstrates, civil society is more engaged in the case of Tunisia and much less so in the case of Egypt. And even in the former case, engagement remains EU-driven, with its real outreach in terms of targeted population yet to fully materialize. In the case of Islamist actors, Voltolini and Colombo show that political Islam is distinguished into three categories and that only moderate actors are engaged with. However, these categories are fluid as highlighted by the ease with which the EU has moved from engagement to disengagement in the space of a few years in the Egyptian case. Along similar lines, Wolff suggests that new practices of religious diplomacy have hitherto taken mostly inward-looking forms, such as the provision of specific training for EEAS' and member states' diplomats, while engagement with Southern Mediterranean partners still sees regime-controlled institutionalized religion as the key point of reference. Thus, one can see that engagement remains selective across the board, and highly so in certain areas, as documented by Durac with reference to counterterrorism.

The final finding is that this selectivity is also shaped by the willingness of Southern Mediterranean partners to deepen their engagement with the EU. This is evident if one pits the Egyptian case against the Tunisian one. As evidenced by Roccu, all Egyptian governments in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, with a partial exception for the first period of the Morsi presidency, were less interested in cooperating with the EU on the terms it proposed. Not only is the EU less attractive, but Egypt has a wider choice of potential partners. Moreover, having

further centralized external relations in the post-Mubarak era, the government is in a much stronger position to decide with whom the EU can engage. This is also reflected in the case of democracy promotion discussed by Dandashly. The fact that the EU engages less with CSOs in Egypt is mainly due to the government's policy and the constraints it imposes on these actors. Exerting a strong control over its population and its organizations, the Egyptian government is indeed in the position to impose exclusionary patterns when it comes to EU policies. Part of this ability is due to the EU's perceived necessity to keep Egypt on its side in migration control and in the fight against terrorism. In contrast to Egypt, successive Tunisian governments have been more interested in engaging with the EU in their transition process. This emerges when we analyse EU democracy promotion, where civil society is much more involved in EU programmes (Dandashly). The same applies to EU's political engagement with Islamist actors. While Salafists are still kept at arm's length, due to the perceived threat that they might pose to the EU's identity and values, the relations with Ennahda have progressively improved and the EU has cooperated with the party on a stable basis (Voltolini and Colombo).

The persistence of selective engagement in the light of at least partial reframing of the security–stability nexus provides an interesting puzzle of its own. To be sure, selective engagement is not necessarily negative in itself. An improved ability on the part of the EU to select appropriate interlocutors in partner countries might bode well in two respects. On the one hand, it might signal greater clarity with respect to the objectives that the EU aims to pursue in the Mediterranean region, as well as to the local actors best suited to help the EU achieve them. On the other hand, more reliance on selective and targeted engagement might also mean greater awareness of the differentiation between and within countries in the region, thus creating the platform for a move away from the 'one-size-fits-all' model of the past (Bicchi, 2006). On both these fronts, the proclaimed pragmatist turn embodied by the EUGS might signal a move in this direction. At the same time, selective engagement can also be problematic, especially in those circumstances in which this is forced upon the EU by partner countries, thus preventing it from engaging with as broad a range of actors as it would otherwise be the case. In these cases, selective engagement might actually suggest a weakening of the EU ability to achieve its own goals in the region. In the light of the variety of forms and meanings that selective engagement can take, and in the light of its position as common denominator in the enactment of the security–stability master frame in the wake of the Arab uprisings, it is all the more important to understand what might account for the mismatch between frame (re-)definition and its enactment.



## Beyond the rhetoric-practice gap: Accounting for the mismatch between defining and enacting frames

The findings outlined above thus point towards some degree of change, which varies across countries and policy areas, in how the EU understands the security–stability nexus in its relations with Southern Mediterranean partners. This has led to a much greater willingness on the part of the EU to engage with a broader range of local actors. However, contributions also agree that the enactment of these changes has been limited at best. Here, one could easily object: if there is little to no change in terms of actual policies, does this not amount to yet another iteration of the rhetoric-practice gap? If we take the relation between discourse and practice as one between input and output within a black box, we might well come to this conclusion. However, such an approach falls in the trap of deriving ‘real’ intentions – then pitted against ‘rhetorical’ ones – from observed outcomes, despite the increasing awareness that ‘assumptions about motives based on the observed outcome of a process are not necessarily accurate’ (Geddes & Hadj-Abdou, 2017, this special issue). This is also because a backward inference from outcome to intention entirely bypasses unintended consequences. Indeed, one of the underlying threads of this special issue is the weight granted to contextual factors, which might interact with EU policies and initiatives to produce outcomes far from the ones the EU favours. In the attempt of addressing this shortcoming, frames appear as a more promising mid-range concept. Through the study of their definition, redefinition and enactment through engagement with Southern Mediterranean partners, one can break down the black box leading from intention to outcomes, and hence examine potential ‘blockages’ limiting – or inhibiting altogether – the enactment of partially revised frames.

Reframing is inherent to the interactive nature of the framing process. As they define frames as ‘a special type of story that focuses attention and provides stability and structure by narrating a problem-centred discourse as it evolves over time’ (2003: 174), Laws and Rein are inherently suggesting that frames are not static, and that thus reframing can take place to make sense of a changing situation in times of uncertainty (cf. Goffman, 1974). Laws and Rein also highlight that frames do not remain confined to the realm of ideas, but are rather embodied in practices, i.e., ‘an interdependent body of intuitions, categories, commitments and actions’ (2003: 178). As they are institutionalized over time, practices create patterns of behaviour that tend to resist reflection also in the face of new and uncertain circumstances. This is a line of argument pursued especially successfully by Herranz-Surrallés (2016) in her work on EU energy policy towards Southern and Eastern Mediterranean partners, where she detects a significant change in the EU’s background ideational abilities (cf. Schmidt, 2008). However, this is not matched by a corresponding change in practices,

still shaped by the more traditional division of labour between the EU's energy governance approach and the national energy diplomacies.

In light of this emerging literature, four factors can provisionally be advanced here as potential contributors to the mismatch between the redefinition of the security–stability nexus in the wake of the Arab uprisings and the relative continuity in terms of practices, and thus in the enactment of the security–stability master frame. Firstly, the institutional dimension is always important in this respect, and particularly so in the EU case, as it might constitute a source of resistance to policy change even when the framing of the policy issue has changed. Three institutional elements play this role in the cases examined in this special issue. As suggested by historical institutionalism (Hall & Taylor, 1996; Pierson, 2000), a first source of resistance might emerge from the path dependency deriving from the policy legacies of the past. This is visible for instance in the resilience of ordoliberal ideas and practices identified by Roccu with reference to economic reforms, but also of institutional practices still reflecting the market liberal frame in the energy sector as discussed by Herranz-Surrallés. A second source of resistance to change despite reframing might instead derive from the power positions gained within policy-making by specific groups, such as EU-based agricultural and financial companies (Kourtelis and Roccu respectively). While perhaps unable to contest the reframing of security and stability in their own sector, these actors are still in a position to slow down policy changes that might affect their perceived interests. The third and final source of stickiness in practices, and thus in the mismatch between frame redefinition and its enactment, is specific to the EU and has to do with the overlapping jurisdictions and competences between national and supranational levels. This is highlighted especially by Durac and Geddes and Hadj-Abdou with reference, respectively, to counterterrorism policy and migration governance.

Secondly, there can be a temporal lag between ideational change and its enactment due to the more enduring nature of practices. For example, Laws and Rein (2003) show that in the US it took over 20 years to see a change in practices following a reframing of the problem of environmental hazards. Similarly, and closer to the cases examined here, Voltolini (2016) finds that although a new frame in EU–Israel relations already began to emerge in the late 1980s, it took around two decades for this to become the dominant understanding in the EU and be implemented into concrete policy steps. It might thus well be that it is still relatively early to observe a substantial change in frame enactment.

Thirdly, the politicization of specific issues might also affect the 'transmission mechanism' from frame definition to enactment, as different levels of public attention and visibility create different pressures on policy-makers to act. Following Grande and Hutter (2016: 7), politicization could be defined as the 'expansion of the scope of conflict within the political system'. As Hay (2007) argues, politicization and depoliticization (as its opposite) imply the movement of issues between the arena of fate and necessity (the non-political) to the one

of deliberation and contingency (the political) (cf. Schmitt, 1966). Despite the pressure towards acting that might occur as an issue becomes politicized, the way in which this can affect the relation between frame definition and frame enactment is not univocal. On the one hand, in the face of perceived policy failure, one could expect the increased salience and politicization of events in the Mediterranean to produce greater pressures towards policy change. This might explain the documents produced by the EU already in 2011, in which it took some ownership over policy choices that the uprisings proved to be misguided (European Commission, 2011a, 2011b). In times of lower salience and politicization, pressures towards substantive policy change might wither. This certainly appears the case with reference to 'deep democracy' as well as 'inclusive development', increasingly becoming hollow phrases as the attention of the public opinion within the EU shifted towards the refugee and migration crisis and the threat posed by Daesh/ISIS. On the other hand, high politicization might also adversely affect policy change. Indeed, one can argue that the more politicized an issue, the more contentious the possible solutions, the higher the risk that the reframing does not result in substantive policy change. This is perhaps best exemplified in the case of EU migration and asylum policy discussed by Geddes and Hadj-Abdou, where the issue has been increasingly politicized and has become hostage of domestic electoral politics in many member states, which are concurrently facing the rise of right-wing parties seeking to foster and capitalize upon a fear of migrants. This potentially adverse effect of politicization, especially when it leads to a fracture between national and supranational levels, is particularly problematic for the EU, which has historically demonstrated to thrive upon the depoliticization of issues to be then addressed through technocratic solutions (Kurki, 2011; Radaelli, 1999).

Finally, given the interactive nature of framing processes as well as the fact that engagement is, by definition, relational, one cannot account for the mismatch between frame definition and enactment without considering how Mediterranean countries interact with the EU and to what extent they are willing to engage with it. As mentioned earlier, not all Southern Mediterranean countries were interested in engaging with the EU in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings. New international actors, such as the Gulf countries, Russia and China, have been perceived as better partners than the EU as their financial and economic support does not imply any formal conditionality. Moreover, some countries have become more vocal in their requests to the EU, pushing for their own interests when dealing with the EU and making the terms of cooperation less one-sided than before. This is for instance what is detected by Durac in counterterrorism policy when he speaks of 'externalisation in reverse'. Given the turbulent times the region is in and the repercussions that are felt in the EU, especially in terms of migration and terrorism, it does not come as a total surprise that the EU's ability to implement its policies is shaped and, in some cases, hijacked by partner countries and their perceived interests.

## Where to from here? Pointers for a future research agenda

As it comparatively assesses the sources and degree of policy change and continuity in EU relations with Southern Mediterranean partners following the Arab uprisings, this special issue contributes directly to the debate suggesting that security and stability are still at the heart of the EU approach in the region. We contend that while this might well be the case, one also needs to look at whether security and stability, and the relation between them – that is: the security–stability nexus – are still defined in the same way they were before the uprisings. The empirical analysis carried out along a number of countries, policies and sectors by the individual contributions demonstrate, with a significant exception, that the security–stability nexus has at least been reframed in the wake of the uprisings. This has also had reverberations on how the objectives of security and stability are pursued by the EU, and hence on the range of actors that the EU aims to engage with in Southern Mediterranean partner countries. Importantly, the special issue also shows that more change has occurred in the redefinition of the security–stability master frame than in its actual enactment via engagement. However, the empirical material presented suggests that it would be misleading to speak simply of continuity, and even more so to derive continuity in intentions from a continuity in outcomes.

The special issue also points towards research avenues that might be pursued fruitfully in the future. Two of them are of a more directly empirical nature, although they would no doubt also provide interesting theoretical refinements to the aspects assessed in this special issue. On the one hand, with direct reference to these conclusions, the hypothesis of the temporal lag between reframing the security–stability nexus and consistently enacting it is one that can only be adequately appraised in the future. In this regard, the full roll-out of the EU Global Strategy might provide an interesting test of the extent to which the reframing of the security–stability nexus is enacted in the Southern Mediterranean. On the other hand, while this special issue has focused its attention on the relation between frame definition and redefinition and frame enactment in the form of engagement, as well as to the feedback effects that such engagement generates on the framing of security and stability, there are two further links that need to be probed further in future research. One of them would go back upstream, so to say, to look at how different modalities of engagement, as well as different actors involved in the process, affect the formulation of specific policies on the part of the EU. The other link would instead go downstream, and examine how engagement affects policy implementation on both the EU and the partner country level.

Through its focus on frames as a mid-range concept that allows researchers to eschew the binary distinction between norms and interests, at least two interesting lines of more theoretical inquiry could emerge from the approach proposed in this special issue. The first could shift the focus beyond the security–stability

nexus as the master frame orienting EU policies in the Southern Mediterranean and ask whether one can see any contending frame that is gaining relevance in how the EU approaches the Mediterranean region. Some of these frames might eventually be subsumed by the dominant master frame, as it has occurred so far for instance in the case of the ordoliberal approach to economic reforms outlined by Roccu, the market liberal frame analysed by Herranz-Surrallés, the secular liberal frame discussed by Wolff with reference to religious diplomacy and by Dandashly in regard to democracy promotion. However, it cannot be excluded in principle that some contending frames might eventually contest the hegemonic role hitherto held by the security–stability nexus, however articulated. This in turn could have profound theoretical implications for debates on policy change in EU relations with the Southern Mediterranean, and more generally with neighbouring countries, as well as for debates on how ideas and power dynamics shape EU external relations.

The second line of theoretical inquiry could explore in more detail the cases in which the feedback effect produced by engagement with Southern Mediterranean partners translates into a fundamental perversion of the original frame. The case of counterterrorism addressed by Durac, and what he calls ‘externalisation in reverse’ drawing from Eder (2011), demonstrates the extent to which partner regimes can exploit informational asymmetries deriving from their knowledge of the domestic and/or regional context and use engagement to achieve different forms of strategic manipulation of the EU. If more cases of this kind would emerge, then questions about the EU role in the Mediterranean, but more generally in international politics, might be raised. For instance, do these forms of manipulation point towards more general weaknesses of the EU as a multi-layered foreign policy actor (Niemann & Bretherton, 2013; Smith, 2004)? If EU frames fail to resonate among partner countries, and are indeed turned back against the EU itself, does this suggest that the soft, civilian and normative means on which the EU has historically relied need to be revised, lest an inexorable decline in its regional and global influence? Given the dramatic transformations experienced by the Arab Mediterranean, it is about time we start asking these more foundational questions. This special issue is but a first, small, step in this direction.

### Disclosure statement

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